What is a collocation?

What are collocations?

A collocation is a combination of two or more words which frequently occur together. If someone says, ‘She’s got yellow hair’, they would probably be understood, but it is not what would ordinarily be said in English. We’d say, ‘She’s got blond hair’. In other words, yellow doesn’t collocate with hair in everyday English. Yellow collocates with, say, flowers or point.

Collocations are not just a matter of how adjectives combine with nouns. They can refer to any kind of typical word combination, for example verb + noun (e.g. arouse someone’s interest, lead a seminar), adverb + adjective (e.g. fundamentally different), adverb + verb (e.g. flatly contradict), noun + noun (e.g. a lick of paint, a team of experts, words of wisdom). There is much more about different grammatical types of collocation in Unit 3.

Phrasal verbs (e.g. come up with, run up, adhere to) and compound nouns (e.g. economy drive, stock market) are sometimes described as types of collocations. In this book we consider them as individual lexical items and so usually include them here only in combination with something else, e.g. come up with a suggestion, run up a bill, adhere to your principles, go on an economy drive, play the stock market. However, it is not always easy to separate collocations and compounds and, where they are useful for learners as an important part of the vocabulary of a topic, we include some compounds in this book too.

It can be difficult for learners of English to know which words collocate, as natural collocations are not always logical or guessable. There is, for example, no obvious reason why we say making friends rather than getting friends or heavy rain, not strong rain.

Learners also need to know when specific collocations are appropriate. This is usually referred to by linguists as knowing which register to use. Alight from a bus is a formal collocation used in notices and other official contexts. In everyday situations we would, of course, always talk about getting off a bus. There is more about register and collocation in Unit 6.

Why is it important to learn collocations?

An appreciation of collocation will help you to:

• use the words you know more accurately
  In other words, you’ll make (NOT do) fewer mistakes.

• sound more natural when you speak and write
  By saying, for example, of great importance, rather than of big or high importance, you won’t just be understood, you will – quite rightly – sound like a fluent user of English.

• vary your speech and, probably more importantly, your writing
  Instead of repeating everyday words like very, good or nice, you will be able to exploit a wider range of language. You would gain more marks in an exam, for instance, for writing We had a blissfully happy holiday in a picturesque little village surrounded by spectacular mountains than for We had a very happy holiday in a nice little village surrounded by beautiful mountains, even though both sentences are perfectly correct.

• understand when a skilful writer departs from normal patterns of collocation
  A journalist, poet, advertiser or other inventive user of language often creates an effect by not choosing the expected collocation. For example, a travel article about the Italian capital might be entitled No place like Rome, a reference to the popular expression There’s no place like home.
Exercises

1.1 Match the two parts of these collocations.

1. adhere to rain
2. arouse different
3. blond of wisdom
4. come up with your principles
5. flatly an economy drive
6. fundamentally a seminar
7. go on someone’s interest
8. heavy contradict
9. lead hair
10. a lick the stock market
11. play of paint
12. words a suggestion

1.2 Correct the underlined collocation errors with words from the advice in B. Be careful, you might find the words in the text, as well as in the examples.

1. Exam candidates often make faults in their use of verbs like do, make, go and get.
2. Try to use a longer range of language when you write.
3. Exam candidates who use collocations well gather better marks.
4. You have to know what normal collocation patterns are before you can lose them.
5. The writer used colloquial language to form an effect.

1.3 Look at these sentences from a hotel brochure. Improve the style by replacing the words in italics with the word in brackets that forms the best collocation. (Use each word only once.)

1. Our new family hotel is set in a nice location and all the rooms have nice furnishings and nice views over the surrounding countryside. (stylish / secluded / breathtaking)
2. Visitors will enjoy the good atmosphere in either of our good dining rooms, both serving good food to both residents and non-residents. (delicious / relaxing / spacious)
3. We organise tours to beautiful surrounding villages where you’ll have the opportunity to take some beautiful photographs and sample the beautiful local cuisine. (mouth-watering / picturesque / stunning)

1.4 Write F (formal), I (informal) or N (neutral) in the brackets at the end of each sentence. In each pair of sentences, there is one neutral sentence and one formal or informal sentence. Underline the collocations that are noticeably formal or informal.

1. a. Passengers must not alight from the bus while it is in motion. ( )
   b. Passengers must not get off the bus while it is moving. ( )
2. a. Let’s grab a bite before we get down to work. ( )
   b. Let’s have something to eat before we start work. ( )
3. a. SFTS has the right to bring the agreement to an end with three months’ notice. ( )
   b. SFTS reserves the right to terminate the agreement with three months’ notice. ( )
4. a. She thinks her boyfriend is planning to pop the question tonight. ( )
   b. She thinks her boyfriend is planning to ask her to marry him tonight. ( )

1.5 Correct the four collocation errors in this paragraph.

The yellow-haired boy said he had joined the English class to get some new friends. He also said that he wanted to learn about collocations because it would be of big importance in helping him to do fewer mistakes when writing in English.
2 Strong, fixed and weak collocations

A Strong collocations
A strong collocation is one in which the words are very closely associated with each other. For example, the adjective mitigating almost always collocates with circumstances or factors; it rarely collocates with any other word. Although she was found guilty, the jury felt there were mitigating circumstances. [factors or circumstances that lessen the blame]

Here are some other examples of strong collocations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>collocation</th>
<th>comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inclement weather was expected.</td>
<td>(very formal) = unpleasant weather</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She has auburn hair.</td>
<td>Auburn collocates only with words connected with hair (e.g. curls, tresses, locks).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I felt deliriously happy.</td>
<td>= extremely happy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strongly associated with happy. Not used with glad, content, sad, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The chairperson adjourned the meeting.</td>
<td>= have a pause or rest during a meeting/trial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adjourn is very strongly associated with meeting and trial.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

B Fixed collocations
Fixed collocations are collocations so strong that they cannot be changed in any way. For example, you can say I was walking to and fro (meaning I was walking in one direction and then in the opposite direction, a repeated number of times). No other words can replace to or fro or and in this collocation. It is completely fixed. The meaning of some fixed collocations cannot be guessed from the individual words. These collocations are called idioms and are focused on in the book English Idioms in Use.

C Weak collocations
Weak collocations are made up of words that collocate with a wide range of other words. For example, you can say you are in broad agreement with someone [generally in agreement with them]. However, broad can also be used with a number of other words – a broad avenue, a broad smile, broad shoulders, a broad accent [a strong accent], a broad hint [a strong hint] and so on. These are weak collocations, in the sense that broad collocates with a broad range of different nouns.

Strong collocations and weak collocations form a continuum, with stronger ones at one end and weaker ones at the other. Most collocations lie somewhere between the two. For example, the (formal) adjective picturesque collocates with village, location and town, and so appears near the middle of the continuum.

D Types of collocations in this book
The collocations in this book are all frequently used in modern English. We used a corpus (a database of language) to check this. We have also selected the collocations which will be useful to you as an advanced learner. We pay most attention to those that are not predictable. A broad avenue, for example, would be predicted by any student who knows broad and avenue. However, the use of broad to mean strong as in a broad accent is more difficult to predict.
Exercises

2.1 Complete the collocations using the words in the box. You will need to use some words more than once.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>adjourn</th>
<th>auburn</th>
<th>broad</th>
<th>deliriously</th>
<th>inclement</th>
<th>mitigating</th>
<th>picturesque</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

1. a ____________________________ accent
2. in ____________________________ agreement
3. ____________________________ circumstances
4. ____________________________ factors
5. ____________________________ hair
6. ____________________________ happy
7. a ____________________________ smile
8. a ____________________________ location
9. ____________________________ a meeting
10. a ____________________________ town
11. ____________________________ a trial
12. ____________________________ weather

2.2 Rewrite each sentence using a collocation from 2.1.

1. Melissa has quite a strong Scottish accent.
2. Bad weather led to the cancellation of the President’s garden party.
3. We were all very happy when we heard we’d won the award.
4. Their new home was in a very pretty location.
5. Because there were circumstances that made the theft less serious, the judge let him off with a warning.
6. I think we should stop the meeting now and continue it tomorrow.
7. She had a big smile on her face when she arrived.
8. She has lovely reddish-brown hair.
9. I think we’re generally in agreement as to what should be done.

2.3 Think of as many collocations as you can for each word. Then look in a dictionary such as the Cambridge Online Dictionary for other suitable words. Write W (weak) or S (strong) next to each group depending on how many words you found.

1. extremely ____________________________ an effort
2. ____________________________ an effort
3. cancel ____________________________ a living
4. ____________________________ a living
5. ____________________________ a meeting
6. ____________________________ feature
7. ____________________________ feature
8. ____________________________ feature
9. ____________________________ feature

2.4 How useful do you think the collocations you have worked on in 2.2 and 2.3 are for you personally? Choose which collocations are most important to you and make sentences with them.

2.5 Over to you

Choose an English-language text that you have worked on recently. Underline five collocations in it. Are these collocations weak, strong or fixed?
Grammatical categories of collocation

A Verb + noun

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>verb</th>
<th>noun</th>
<th>example</th>
<th>meaning of verb</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>draw up</td>
<td>a list, a contract</td>
<td>Our lawyer <strong>drew up a contract</strong> for us to sign.</td>
<td>prepare something, usually official, in writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pass up</td>
<td>a chance, an opportunity</td>
<td>I didn’t want to <strong>pass up the chance</strong> of seeing Hong Kong, so I agreed to go on the trip.</td>
<td>fail to take advantage of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>withstand</td>
<td>pressure, the impact</td>
<td>The police officer’s vest can <strong>withstand the impact</strong> of a bullet.</td>
<td>bear</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

B Noun + verb

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>noun</th>
<th>verb</th>
<th>example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>opportunity</td>
<td>arise</td>
<td><strong>An opportunity arose</strong> for me to work in China, so I went and spent a year there.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>standards</td>
<td>slip</td>
<td>People feel educational <strong>standards slipped</strong> when the government cut finances.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

C Noun + noun

- Noun + noun collocations used to describe groups or sets:
  - There’s been **a spate of attacks/thefts** in our area recently. [unusually large number happening in close succession]
  - The minister had to put up with **a barrage of questions/insults** from the angry audience. [unusually large number, happening at the same time]
- Noun + noun collocations used with uncountable nouns:
  - By **a stroke of luck** I found my keys in the rubbish bin! [sudden, unexpected piece of luck]
  - She gave me **a snippet of information** which is top secret. [small piece of information]

D Adjective + noun

This is not an **idle threat**; I will call the police if this happens again! [simply a threat]

He waited in the **vain hope** that the minister would meet him. [unlikely to be fulfilled hope]

There is **mounting concern/criticism/fury** over the decision. [growing concern, etc.]

The **simple/plain truth** is that no one was aware of the problem.

E Adverb + adjective

The article provides an **intensely personal** account of the writer’s relationship with his sons.

Joe’s sister was a **stunningly attractive** woman.

F Verb + adverb or prepositional phrase

The teenager tried to persuade his mother that he was innocent but he **failed miserably**.

I don’t like to travel with my brother because he **drives recklessly**. [wildly, without care]

As soon as the singer came on stage she **burst into song**.

If your dog starts to **foam at the mouth**, you should take it to the vet immediately.

G More complex collocations

Mary was looking forward to retiring and **taking it easy for a while**.

It’s time you **put the past behind you** and started focusing on the future.
Exercises

3.1 Match a word from each box to form collocations. Not all the collocations appear on the opposite page, so use a dictionary such as the Cambridge Online Dictionary to help you if necessary.

disease  evidence  opportunity  smoke  
standards  teeth  wind  withstand

1 .................................................. 5 ..................................................
2 .................................................. 6 ..................................................
3 .................................................. 7 ..................................................
4 .................................................. 8 ..................................................

3.2 Complete each sentence using a collocation from 3.1 in the appropriate form.

1 The scientific ................. human beings first emerged in Africa.
2 The ............... all night and it was raining, so I couldn’t sleep.
3 The machine has to be made of materials that can ................. a lot of .................
4 Oh, no! There’s a fire. Look at the ......................... from those buildings.
5 It was so cold I couldn’t stop my ................. from .................
6 Our survey shows that parents believe ................. have ................. at the school.
7 You must accompany Mason on one of his business trips to Asia, if the ................. ever .................
8 An alarming new ................. is ................. among cattle in the south of the country.

3.3 Rewrite the underlined part of each sentence using a collocation from the opposite page.

1 I don’t want to say no to the chance of meeting such a famous person.
2 We’ll have to write a contract before you start work, as it’s a new position.
3 You’re working too hard. You should try to relax for a short period of time.
4 This new bullet-proof car can take the impact of a rocket-propelled grenade.
5 Do you have any interesting little bits of information about our new boss to tell us?
6 The minister faced a large number of questions from reporters.
7 I had some luck last week. The police found my stolen wallet and nothing was missing.
8 There’s been a number of violent attacks in the area recently.
9 After her divorce Mandy was determined to forget the past and build a new life.

3.4 Answer these questions.

1 Who do you think is the most stunningly attractive person you have ever seen?
2 What should you do if you are in a car with someone who is driving recklessly?
3 Do you prefer walking in the country if there is a gentle breeze or a strong wind?
4 Would you write your most intensely personal thoughts and feelings in your diary?

3.5 Choose the correct collocation.

1 He said he would throw us out, but it was just a(n) ................. threat.
2 They rushed the victim to hospital, in the ................. hope of saving her life.
3 The government is encountering mounting ................. climbing ................. rising ................. of its policies.
4 There is raising ................. concern across the world about climate change.
5 The horse was fuming ................. foaming ................. fainting at the mouth, so we called the vet.
6 Suddenly, without warning, Marta busted ................. bustled ................. burst into song.
7 The right ................. straight ................. plain truth is that I hate my job.
8 I tried to persuade her but I’m afraid I failed ................. miserably ................. wholeheartedly.
Finding and working on collocations in texts

Finding collocations

You can expand your collocation vocabulary by training yourself to notice collocations whenever you read. Note the collocations in these three examples of texts from different sources – a newspaper feature, a film review and a website for London tourists.

LOCAL SPOTLIGHT

As a newly qualified teacher at a comprehensive school in Wiltshire, every day Joe faces the challenge of gaining the respect of a class of 15-year-olds. Joe, 26, admits it is a tough challenge but thinks he is winning the battle. Joe, who teaches English and media studies, and coaches a school football team, will qualify fully in July, pending the results of his lesson assessments. With this milestone passed, and the increased financial stability it will bring, Joe will turn his thoughts to buying his first home.

1 (formal) as long as he achieves successful results  2 major life event behind him

The Interpreter

STARRING
Nicole Kidman
Sean Penn

She has a gift for languages, which brings her to the UN. She wants to make a difference. She is idealistic in that single-minded, dedicated manner associated with freedom fighters. Silvia (Nicole Kidman) remains an enigma. When Tobin Keller (Sean Penn) begins to investigate her, he is faced with a blank sheet. She is beautiful, blonde, lissom and lithe. She lives alone, has no lover, rides a Vespa throughout New York and works all day, providing simultaneous translation for delegates. She has an odd accent, which, like everything else about her, is difficult to pin down.

3 hard to fix or place

Entertaining children in London

Covent Garden’s buskers and jugglers provide no-cost entertainment in a car-free setting, and you’ve always got the chance of being plucked from the crowd to help out with a trick. Don’t underestimate the value of London’s public transport as a source of fun, either. The #11 double-decker from Victoria, for instance, will trundle you past the Houses of Parliament, Trafalgar Square and the Strand on its way to St Paul’s Cathedral for a modest sum. The driverless Docklands Light Railway is another guaranteed source of amusement – grab a seat at the front of the train and pretend to be the driver, then take a boat back to the centre of town from Greenwich.

Remember you will also hear collocations in conversations, lectures, songs and films. Try to get into the habit of recording any interesting collocations that you notice.

Recording collocations

When working on collocations in a text, use your dictionary to find more relating to one or both parts of the original collocation. You can record strong collocations in collocation forks:

![Simultaneous translation equation pending the outcome results response](image)

and weak ones in collocation bubbles (because there are so many more of them):

![Practical sentimental novelty place great assess something's value](image)
Exercises

4.1 Complete each sentence using a collocation from A.

1 Tania has always had a ____________________________ so I’m not surprised she wants to study Chinese at university.
2 At high tide the sea covers the causeway and the only way to get to the island is to ____________________________.
3 It’s very crowded in this café. You ____________________________ and I’ll get our drinks.
4 Once my exams are over I’ll ____________________________ planning a holiday.
5 Far more people these days manage to ____________________________ against cancer.
6 Most politicians say they enter politics because they want to ____________________________.
7 Try not to ____________________________ having good friends. Ultimately, friendship is far more important than work.
8 He’s got the job – ____________________________ a successful ____________________________ in his driving test tomorrow.
9 Although they lack experience, ____________________________ doctors are often very enthusiastic and passionate about their work.

4.2 Complete the collocations. The first letters are given to help you. Use a dictionary such as the Cambridge Online Dictionary if necessary.

to j _ _ _ a _ t _ _
to p _ _ _ u _ _
to g _ _ t _
to s _ _ a

to b _ i w _ _ a

4.3 Check these expressions (a) in a good dictionary and (b) using a search engine. Which two are collocations and which two are not?

1 learn by head  2 learn by heart  3 lose a chance  4 miss a chance

4.4 Answer these questions.

1 Name three milestones in your life that you have already passed.
2 Are you already fully qualified? If so, as what? If not, when will you be?
3 What are some typical sources of income?
4 What is the toughest challenge you have ever faced?
5 What qualities would be needed by someone providing simultaneous translation?
6 What are some examples of things that have sentimental value for you?

4.5 Here is one student’s plan for work on collocations. Complete the gaps, using a dictionary if necessary. Then tick the ideas you can use yourself.

• (1) ____________________________ an effort to notice collocations in any English text I read.
• (2) ____________________________ hold of a good dictionary to check other collocations for words that I want to learn.
• Write down at least three collocations for each new word I want to (3) ____________________________ to memory.
• Look back over old homework to see where I have (4) ____________________________ mistakes with collocations and (5) ____________________________ my best to (6) ____________________________ those mistakes in future.
• (7) ____________________________ a point of using good collocations when I have to write or speak in English.
• Read and listen to as much English as (8) ____________________________ because that will expose me to natural collocations.
• Every week revise the collocations I have (9) ____________________________ a note of in my vocabulary file.
What is register?

Our use of language changes according to the situation that we are in. If your close friend hosts a party, you could say, ‘Thanks for the party. It was a blast.’ (very informal) However, if your boss was the host, you would probably say, ‘Thanks for the party. I really enjoyed it.’ (neutral) In this example, neutral and very informal are both examples of register.

The register of most language is neutral (it can be used in any situation). However, register can also be formal, informal, characteristic of a certain professional field (e.g. legal, journalistic or media) or specific to official notices and forms.

Our choice of register depends on what we are talking about (business, the news, the neighbours), who we are talking to (friends, strangers, figures of authority) and how we are talking to them (in a letter, in an email, in public, in private). Study the table below and notice how different words and phrases are used to describe the same situation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>example</th>
<th>register</th>
<th>comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The police are investigating / looking into the arms deal.</td>
<td>neutral</td>
<td>Either version would not seem out of place in any spoken or written contexts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The cops are trying to dig out info about the arms deal.</td>
<td>informal</td>
<td>Phrasal verbs are often an informal alternative – although some are neutral.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The police are conducting an investigation into the arms deal.</td>
<td>formal</td>
<td>Longer words of Latin or Greek origin often indicate more formal language.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police to probe arms deal</td>
<td>neutral, journalistic</td>
<td>Probe is typical of newspaper headline style.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The arms deal may be subject to police investigation.</td>
<td>formal, legal and official</td>
<td>Subject to investigation is typical of a bureaucratic or legal style.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Be careful not to think of formal language as written and informal language as spoken. There is a lot of overlap. For example, markedly formal language is most typical of official or academic writing and official legal or bureaucratic speech. Informal language is typical of conversation, personal letters and emails, messages on social media and some journalism.

Formal versus neutral collocations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>formal (from official documents)</th>
<th>neutral (spoken)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students must submit their assignments by 1 May.</td>
<td>‘You have to hand in your assignments by 1 May.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students may request an extension after consulting their tutor.</td>
<td>‘You can ask for an extension after you’ve talked to / had a word with your tutor.’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Informal versus neutral collocations

That film was totally awesome! (mainly used by teenagers, predominantly US) [neutral equivalent: absolutely amazing/fantastic]

That party was well good! (Well used to mean ‘very’/’really’, mainly by younger UK speakers.)

I haven’t a clue / the foggiest idea what you mean. (neutral equivalent: I have no idea)

We can grab a snack before the meeting if you’re hungry. (neutral equivalent: have a snack)

Tip

Make a note in your notebook if a collocation is very formal or informal in register.
Exercises

5.1 Write F (formal), I (informal) or N (neutral) in the brackets at the end of each sentence. Underline the collocations which indicate the register. Then rewrite the formal and informal sentences to make them neutral.

Example: Do not alight from the bus until it stops. (F) Do not get off the bus until it stops.

1 I feel dead tired all the time. ( )
2 We were all bored stupid by the poetry reading. ( )
3 Currency exchange offices are located in the arrivals lounge. ( )
4 She conducted a study of single-parent family units. ( )
5 She did her degree in London and found work there in 2015. ( )
6 I just got the latest software so my computer is bang up to date. ( )
7 Affix a passport-size photograph to the application form. ( )
8 Jake asked his tutor for an extension to complete his dissertation. ( )

5.2 Match the beginning of each sentence with its ending. Then label each sentence with the appropriate register from the list below. Underline the collocations which indicate the register.

Registers: informal conversation (IC) journalism/news (J) entertainment (E)
technical (T) legal (L) notices (N)

1 This is breaking a ring after dinner. ( )
2 These are the songs that are climbing according to model and road conditions. ( )
3 There are tons of good reasons blockbuster from Star Studios. ( )
4 Visitors must keep to the designated electronic circuit. ( )
5 In any such case, customers shall forfeit the fitness machines to 20 minutes. ( )
6 I’ll give you to win support for the plan. ( )
7 The minister will tour Asia in a bid for studying law. ( )
8 A microchip is a miniaturised express to a second time. ( )
9 Please restrict your use of areas at all times. ( )
10 A witness may be asked to the right to compensation. ( )

5.3 Complete this conversation between a doctor and a patient, using the verbs in the box in the appropriate form. The language is quite informal, without technical medical terms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>come</th>
<th>clear</th>
<th>do</th>
<th>feel</th>
<th>get</th>
<th>run</th>
<th>take</th>
<th>write</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Doctor: What can I (1) ________________ for you, Mr Wilson?

Patient: Well, Doctor, I’ve been (2) ________________ a temperature for the last couple of days and I’ve (3) ________________ out in a rash on my neck. Do you see? These red spots here.

Doctor: Hmm. Let’s (4) ________________ a look.

Patient: It’s very irritating and I have trouble (5) ________________ off to sleep at night. Then I (6) ________________ down all day and can’t concentrate on my work.

Doctor: Right. I don’t think it’s anything serious. I’ll (7) ________________ you out a prescription for some lotion which should help to (8) ________________ up the rash.

5.4 Look at how the doctor describes the case in his records using more technical language. Choose the correct word from the choices provided. Use a dictionary to help if necessary.

A patient (1) presented / represented this morning with an (2) elevating / elevated temperature. He was also (3) exposing / exhibiting a neck rash. He further (4) complained / grumbled of an (5) inability / impossibility to concentrate.